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Location, Location, Location

The Arthur Ashe Monument and Monument Avenue

On July 10, 1996 a monument honoring Arthur Ashe, the late tennis champion, educator, and social activist, was unveiled at the intersection of Roseneath Road and Monument Avenue in Richmond, Virginia, Ashe's hometown. The mayor, the governor, and Ashe's widow and daughter did not attend the ceremony, but other members of the Ashe family participated. There were also plenty of reporters and television cameras because the ceremony marked an end to two years of controversy about the monument's location. A small group of white men displayed the Confederate flag as a silent protest against Ashe's presence on Monument Avenue.[1]

The Monument Avenue Historic District begins about a mile to the east, at Stuart Circle, with its equestrian statue of the dashing Confederate cavalryman, J. E. B. Stuart, erected in 1907. Moving west one comes to Marius-Jean-Antonin Mercié's Robert E. Lee, the avenue's earliest statue, unveiled in 1890 in an expanse of empty fields just outside Richmond's then city limits. Next, there is an ensemble of pillars surrounding a statue of Jefferson Davis, unveiled just a few days after the Stuart statue. Farther west, at the intersection with the Boulevard, is F. William Sievers's stolid equestrian Stonewall Jackson, unveiled in 1919. A few blocks west of it is Sievers's allegorical memorial to Matthew Fontaine Maury, oceanographer and commander in the Confederate States Navy, unveiled in 1929. Although Monument Avenue extends several miles farther west as a thoroughfare, the historic district ends at the intersection with Roseneath Road, before the avenue crosses the busy freeway and railroad tracks that make a practical boundary between the monumental architecture and the suburbs.[2]

The story of how Arthur Ashe ended up there can only be sketched in this essay. Between 1994 and 1996, Richmond presented a textbook example of, to use Bernard Levinson's formulation, "polities roiled in controversies attached to deciding who within a particular society should be counted as a hero worth honoring with the erection of a monument or the naming of a public space." Such controversies are important, Levinson continues, because public monuments are a "self-conscious civic education designed to create, or at least to maintain, a privileged notion of community identity." They are especially important in the American South because "pride of sacred place" has already been granted to memorials to the defeated Confederacy, a "Lost Cause" that can no longer be absolved of the evils of slavery and racial inequality.[3]

Just before Arthur Ashe died of AIDS-related pneumonia in January 1993, he agreed to cooperate with Paul Di Pasquale, a Richmond sculptor, who proposed to craft a statue in Ashe's honor. Di Pasquale, an independent and unabashedly entrepreneurial artist, presented his plan to the board of Virginia Heroes, Inc., an educational organization that proudly claims Ashe as its founder, and the board agreed to raise funds for the monument. Through 1994, there were intermittent progress reports in the press, with several Richmond locations, including Monument Avenue, suggested as possible places for the statue. Virginia Heroes decided to move swiftly and without publicity to get the statue in place, a strategy that its leaders later justified as essential for convincing donors to provide the estimated $400,000 that would be needed. On June 19, 1995, the City Planning Commission not only agreed to place the Ashe statue on Monument Avenue but also shifted its location eastward into the historic district from the site just west of the freeway that Virginia Heroes had proposed.[4]

Uproar ensued. There were many different opinions, and they cut across racial lines, but the debate resolved into four general positions. That Arthur Ashe was too good for Monument

Avenue was expressed forcefully by the *Richmond Free Press*, an African American weekly. Monument Avenue, editor Raymond Boone contended, celebrated the worst in Richmond's history, and to put Ashe there would make "wrong-headed Confederate losers who fought to preserve slavery" his equals. Ashe on "Rebels' Row" would falsify history.[5]

Others argued that Ashe's accomplishments did not qualify him for a place on Monument Avenue. Such an argument may have been for some a way to oppose the monument without risking charges of bigotry. The conservative *Richmond Times-Dispatch*'s first and most-emotional editorial stated that the Monument Avenue proposal made Ashe "a revisionist pawn" and was but "a petty attempt to put a finger in history's eye." Subsequent editorials plumped for other locations more appropriate for a tennis champion, such as at the Byrd Park tennis courts, where young Ashe could not play because of segregation, or at the Arthur Ashe Athletic Center.[6]

The spokesmen for the position that Monument Avenue was reserved for the heroes of the Confederacy tended to be leaders of patriotically southern organizations, such as the Sons of Confederate Veterans, that had recently become energized by attempts to remove Confederate symbols from state flags in Georgia and South Carolina and other so-called "heritage violations." Monument Avenue was "hallowed ground," a leader of the Atlanta-based Heritage Preservation Association declared, and putting Ashe there was an insult to "the Confederate-American population." Many white Richmonders no doubt agreed with them.[7]

Finally, there were those who believed that placing the Ashe statue on Monument Avenue would be good for Richmond. Michael Paul Williams, an African American and a columnist for the *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, wrote that Ashe's presence on Monument Avenue would be "as satisfying as justice," and the statue would be "a symbol of racial reconciliation." Noting that Ashe was widely admired in Richmond, *Style Weekly* declared optimistically that the decision to put Ashe on Monument Avenue "was a testament to our progress, not a challenge to our heritage as Confederates." The problem, it continued, was that Virginia Heroes had tried to minimize public debate about modifying the city's "grandest boulevard."[8]

All of the arguments, whether pro or con, treated Monument Avenue as a symbolic space for locating monuments. But it is also an actual street with a history. The avenue was laid out and built between 1890 and the Great Depression, with residential construction following the monuments westward. It was a preferred place for the wealthy to live, and large and impressive homes line the avenue. It is a divided boulevard, with parallel rows of trees planted along its central median and in a single row in front of the houses. As architectural historian Richard Guy Wilson explains, what makes Monument Avenue a special place is "the interaction between the monuments, the buildings, the landscaping, and the street."[9]

No statues had been erected there since Maury in 1929. In 1956 and 1957, when it was championing Virginia's "Massive Resistance" to school desegregation, the now defunct *Richmond News Leader* occasionally editorialized in favor of more statues on the avenue as a demonstration of "how highly Richmond still prizes its Confederate tradition." Nothing came of it, but in November 1965 the City Planning Commission did propose a radical plan for Monument Avenue, which included moving the Stuart and Davis statues so that they might be more easily viewed from passing automobiles and adding seven more Confederate statues along the avenue's western extension. The *Richmond News Leader* was enthusiastic, but others, including the *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, were not. Richmond had done its part for the Lost Cause, the newspaper said, and any new statues should honor great Virginians of other eras. Black leaders stated that they objected to expanding the Confederate theme. Henry L. Marsh, who became the city's first black mayor in 1975 and is now a state senator, declared then that "the spirit of Richmond at the present time should be reflected" on Monument Avenue. The plan was shelved.[10]

Since World War II the city's wealthy elite had been departing to the western suburbs, and a number of the residences along Monument Avenue were converted to offices and apartments. The 1965 plan was an attempt to stem the decline, and its rejection put primary responsibility for the avenue's future on its residents. Galvanized by successful protests in 1968 against the city's plan to smooth asphalt over the avenue's original paving blocks, the Monument Avenue Preservation Society came into being. It spon-

sored such activities as croquet tournaments, Sunday promenades, and a very popular annual Easter Parade "to recall and illustrate activities which took place on Monument Avenue in the early 1900s." The preservationists did much to revive the entire neighborhood but did so by sidestepping the Confederate iconography of the statues. Richard Guy Wilson makes a similar move in his appreciative essay, first acknowledging that the statues honor an ignoble cause and then proposing that, nonetheless, the historic district's unity of buildings, landscape, and monuments constitutes a separate, more attractive message.[11]

There were good reasons, then, for Virginia Heroes and the City Planning Commission to recommend the site on the western edge of the historic district. The Ashe statue would be highly visible there, and the city would maintain the site into the foreseeable future. When a black member of the city council had proposed constructing a memorial to leaders of the Civil Rights Movement on Monument Avenue in 1991, the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* stated that the proposal "deserves thoughtful consideration." After the city council voted instead to create a committee to investigate further a memorial to the Civil Rights Movement, the newspaper declared only that Monument Avenue should not be the sole site that the committee would consider. The advocates of the Ashe statue might well have concluded that by 1995 Monument Avenue had come to mean more to Richmond than just the Confederate theme.[12]

The controversy measured just how badly they had misjudged the power of symbols. The city council postponed action until a public hearing could take place on July 17,1995. Even with speakers limited to less than four minutes, it was after midnight before the council members could adjourn to a private room to deliberate. More than 100 people spoke, with the proponents and opponents of the Monument Avenue site about evenly divided. Johnnie Ashe, the hero's brother, spoke eloquently of the family's preference for the Monument Avenue location, but observers agreed that the turning point in the debate occurred with one man's simple observation that a statue at the tennis courts or the athletic center would cause Ashe to be remembered as merely an athlete; a statue on Monument Avenue would cause him to be remembered as a man. Early the next morning, the city council voted to accept the proposed location, as well as to develop the African American sports hall of fame that Ashe had championed for Richmond and also to create a downtown park in Ashe's memory. The *Richmond Times-Dispatch* commissioned a poll that showed a majority of blacks and whites still opposed the site on Monument Avenue.[13]

There were rumors that just before the hearing someone had made a credible offer to the city council to pay the entire cost of the statue if it were placed at Byrd Park rather than on Monument Avenue. The opponents of the statue did not give up. Some local arts leaders had already criticized Di Pasquale's design, but now the complaints grew louder. With his arms raised above his head Ashe seemed to be playing a mean game of "keep away" from the children surrounding him, they said. From the rear the statue resembled a saguaro cactus or a bowling trophy, they said. Ashe's athletic clothes were too casual for Monument Avenue, they said. There should be an international competition to select a work more appropriate to the site.[14]

Whatever the aesthetic merits of the criticism, Di Pasquale had a ready response. Arthur Ashe had endorsed his composition; no other work could make that claim. Then, in January 1996, the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* published a statement from Ashe's widow, her first on the subject. Arthur Ashe had assumed that the statue that he discussed with Di Pasquale would stand outside his sports hall of fame, she claimed. Had he known that it was to go on Monument Avenue, he would have suggested a different pose, and he might not have approved such a memorial in the first place.[15]

Not only had she stripped Di Pasquale of Ashe's mantle, but her offer to help raise money to establish the "Hard Road to Glory Sports Hall of Fame" caused the city council to revise its approval of the Monument Avenue site. Di Pasquale's Ashe would be placed there only temporarily. There would be an international competition to create an appropriate memorial to African Americans for the avenue, and Di Pasquale's work would then move to the sports hall of fame. In March, however, when a group calling itself "Citizens for Excellence in Public Art" asked for the city's approval to raise $1 million for the art competition, a majority of the city council condemned the primarily white group as elitist and refused to approve its plan.[16]

Despite all, preparation of Di Pasquale's Ashe statue went forward. Some joked that it should be on wheels for the later transfer to another location, but the granite base was installed in late June, as were new traffic signals at the intersection. The week before the unveiling, *Style Weekly's* annual "Best of Richmond" competition selected the controversy as the year's "Best Example of Media Hype."[17]

Maybe it was, but, with the statue now almost certain to be a permanent part of Richmond's Monument Avenue, the controversy's consequences are worth considering. As Levinson observes, one potential solution to the reality of "conflicting symbologies" in multicultural societies "is to add new statues without displacing the old." But, what kind of society is it, he asks, that "could agree to pay equal homage to ideological opposites"?[18]

Following the unveiling, the *Richmond Free Press* repeated its conviction that Ashe's presence would merely legitimate the Confederates as heroes, too. What may actually be happening is more complicated. On a recent Sunday afternoon, people jogged and walked dogs along the median of Monument Avenue, and a prankster had placed a large guitar into the arms of Matthew Fontaine Maury. For the many who care about preserving this beautiful public space, the Ashe statue may just ease lingering discomfort about the avenue's Confederate iconography, evidencing as it does that Richmond has changed for the better.[19]

It is also possible that the Ashe statue may historicize the way in which people understand the Confederate statues on the avenue. For example, the sixth edition of the popular *Insider's Guide to Greater Richmond* founds its description of Monument Avenue on a theme of constant contestation over the symbolism of the statues that began with Lee and continues with Ashe. An Internet search also brings up a student-created Web site at the University of Virginia that explicitly interrogates the symbolism of the Confederate statues through analysis of the controversy over the Ashe statue.[20]

On the other hand, some responses to the presence of the Ashe statue on Monument Avenue confirm the validity of David Lowenthal's observation that "what heritage does not highlight it often hides." Less than a month after the unveiling, the Sons of Confederate Veterans convened the organization's annual meeting in Richmond. A march down Monument Avenue was to be a feature, and a journalist asked about the new Ashe statue.. "We have no objection to the statue," said an organizer of the march. "We're not going anywhere near it. It's not one of our concerns." [21]

Recently I visited my neighborhood drug store and where I saw a rack of souvenir postcards. One postcard is labeled "Monument Avenue" and has small photographs of the five Confederate statues. Just above it on the rack is a separate postcard depicting the Ashe statue.[22] At least it's there, I thought to myself. At least it's there.

Notes

1 *USA Today,* 11 July 1996; *Style Weekly,* 16 July 1996; *Richmond Free Press,* 18-20 July 1996. Richmond has one daily newspaper, the *Richmond Times-Dispatch,* but two widely distributed free weeklies, the *Richmond Free Press* and *Style Weekly,* also covered the Ashe controversy.

2 Kathy Edwards, Esme Howard, and Toni Prawl, *Monument Avenue: History and Architecture* (Washington: Historic American Buildings Survey, 1992).

3 Sanford Levinson, *Written in Stone: Public Monuments in Changing Societies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998). The quoted phrases are from pp. 4, 85, 33.

4 *Richmond Free Press,* 3-5 February 1994; 29 September-1 October 1994; 8-10 December 1994; *Style Weekly,* 13 June 1995. On Di Pasquale, see also *Style Weekly,* 9 July 1996.

5 *Richmond Free Press,* 6-8 July 1995; 20-22 July 1995. Reporter Margaret Edds gave a useful summary of the controversy in the Norfolk Virginia-Pilot, reprinted in the *Richmond Free Press,* 13-15 July 1995. See also, for example, *New York Times,* 18 June 1995, and *Raleigh News and Observer,* 20 June 1995.

6 *Richmond Times-Dispatch,* 18, 25, 28 June 1995.

7 Quoted phrases are from *Richmond Times-Dispatch,* 27 June 1995. See also Tony Horwitz, *Confederates in the Attic: Dispatches from the Unfinished Civil War* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998).

8 *Richmond Times-Dispatch,* 26 June 1995 (by the time his next column appeared, on 3 July 1995, the "statue debacle" had angered Williams, who reminded his readers that for blacks Monument Avenue was "not hallowed ground but a painful reminder of black subjugation"); *Style Weekly,* 11 July 1995 (the quoted phrase is from a cover story entitled "We Can Do This: Finding the Common Ground in Honoring Arthur Ashe").

9 Richard Guy Wilson, "Monument Avenue, Richmond, Virginia," in Jan Cigliano and Sarah Bradford Landau, eds., *The Great American Avenue, 1850-1920* (San Francisco: Pomegranate Artbooks,

1994), 279. See also Jay Killian Bowman Williams, *Changed Views and Unforeseen Prosperity: Richmond of 1890 Gets a Monument to Lee* (Richmond: Privately Printed, 1980); and Allan B. Jacobs, *Great Streets* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1993), 100-106.

10 *Richmond News Leader*, 14, 17 November 1956; 16 March 1957; 17, 27 November 1965; *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, 21 November, 6, 7 December (statement by Henry Marsh) 1965; 6 February 1966.

11 *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, 5 October 1969; Marie Tyler-McGraw, *At the Falls: Richmond, Virginia, and Its People* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 295; Wilson, "Monument Avenue, Richmond, Virginia," 279. The quoted phrase is from a resolution permitting the Monument Avenue Preservation Society to close Monument Avenue for its Easter Parade in 1974 (Ordinance and Resolutions of the Council of the City of Richmond, 1972-1974, 1434). The *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, 27 June 1995, quoted the complaint of one resident of Monument Avenue that the Ashe statue was "modern art in a turn-of-the-century, trolley-car neighborhood."

12 *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, 21 September; 16 October 1991. In 1993, the Richmond City Council repealed a long-forgotten city ordinance from 1937 that had designated "the intersections of all streets with Monument Avenue throughout its entire length as exclusive sites for the erection of appropriate confederate [sic] monuments or memorials" (Ordinances and Resolutions of the Council of the City of Richmond, 1936-1938, 95-96; *Style Weekly*, 11 July 1996).

13 *Richmond Free Press*, 20-22 July 1995, reported that of 108 speakers, 47 favored the Monument Avenue location, 45 favored other sites, and 16 made no recommendations. For the opinion polls, see *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, 19 July 1995. The national news media generally reported the hearing and its result in a positive light. See, for example, *USA Today*, 18, 19 July 1995.

14 On the rumors, see *Style Weekly*, 9 July 1996. On the criticism, see *Style Weekly*, 24 October 1995.

15 *Richmond Free Press*, 4-6 January 1996. See also *New York Times*, 4 January 1996, and *Saint Louis Post-Dispatch*, 16 January 1996. Levinson notes that this episode "raises additional questions of how people become appropriated by the culture for use as symbols independent of any of their own wishes" (Written in Stone, 117).

16 *Richmond Free Press*, 11-13 January 1996; *Style Weekly*, 16 January, 9 July 1996.

17 *Richmond Free Press*, 27-29 June 1996; *Style Weekly*, 16 April, 18 June 1996; *New York Times*, 5 July 1996.

18 Levinson, Written in Stone, 25-26. On the fate of the sports hall of fame, see *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, 31 October 1997.

19 *Richmond Free Press*, 18-20 July 1996.

20 Paula Kripaitis Neely, *The Insiders' Guide to Greater Richmond* (Manteo, N.C.: Insiders Publishing, 1997), 203-209; Brooke Ramsay and Sarah Dobson, "Monument Avenue, Richmond Virginia" is at <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~UG97/monument/begin.html>.

21 David Lowenthal, *Possessed by the Past: The Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History* (New York: The Free Press, 1996), 156; Washington Times, 4 August 1996.

22 Both postcards are produced by Cards Unlimited, Inc., of Keysville, Virginia.

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